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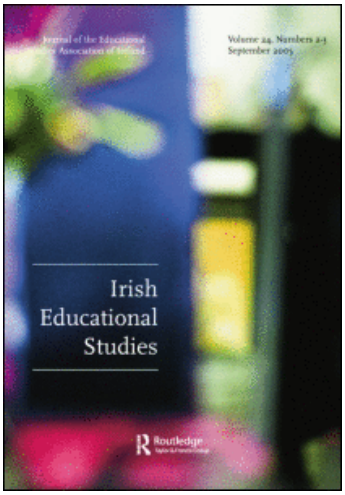

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Students' experiences of aggressive behaviour and bully/victim problems in Irish schools

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Since the 1980s, a greater understanding of the frequency and typology of bullying/victim problems in schools has been accrued in many countries, including Ireland, where a nationwide study of bullying behaviour in schools was undertaken in 1993–1994. However, rather less is known about Irish school students' involvement in other forms of aggressive behaviour. The purpose of the survey described here was to ascertain the prevalence of school students' experiences of certain categories of general aggressive behaviour, as well as the prevalence of bully/victim problems, in Irish schools. Data were obtained via the administration of a specially and extensively modified version of the Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire to 5569 participants (2312 primary and 3257 post-primary) in Ireland in the autumn/winter school term of 2004–2005. Principally, it was found that experiences of aggressive behaviour appeared to be widespread; whilst age trends varied according to individual categories of aggressive behaviour, gender differences were more clear – boys were more frequently the targets of 'direct' forms of aggressive behaviour, whereas girls were more frequently the targets of 'indirect' forms. Furthermore, bully/victim problems appear to be persistent in Irish schools, with 35.3% of primary students and 36.4% of post-primary students reporting having been bullied over the last three months. It was contended that inroads into preventing and dealing with bullying and aggressive behaviour in Irish schools might best be made via governmentally-supported nationwide intervention programmes, as has been the case in Norway.

Keywords: school bullying; school aggression; school violence; gender differences; Ireland

Introduction

Bullying behaviour in schools

The phenomena of school bullying behaviour and violence have been concerns for those within the education and child welfare sectors, as well as within broader society, for many years. Indeed, Rigby, Smith, and Pepler (2004, 1) note that 'there was much animated public discussion of bullying in English private schools in the mid-nineteenth century, following the publication of the famous novel *Tom Brown's school days* (Hughes, 1857)'. Empirical research into the subject of school bullying and violence is, however, more recent. Michael Rutter's classic studies of psychiatric epidemiology amongst children on the Isle of Wight (1964–1974) included survey items on bullying (Rutter 1976); and, following Bandura et al.'s study of the vicarious reinforcement of aggressive behaviour (Bandura, Ross, and Ross 1963), Hapkiewicz

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and Roden (1971) were able to demonstrate the negative effect of aggressive cartoons on children's interpersonal play – essentially, that it is possible for children to learn to behave aggressively through the imitation of either real-life or television-based models.

Over the past four decades, a still clearer picture of the frequency and typology of bully/victim problems[1] in schools in many countries has been accrued. For example, a relatively early broad-scale survey of over 6700 participants in the UK (in Sheffield, South Yorkshire, in 1990) showed that 27% of primary school students had been bullied 'sometimes' or more frequently, with 10% of these having been bullied at least once per week. For their secondary school contemporaries, these figures were 10% and 4% respectively (Smith 1997). A survey undertaken in Scotland the year before had found that 6% of 12- to 16-year-old students reported that they had been bullied, and that 4% reported that they had been involved in bullying others (Mellor 1990). In Australia, a combination of regionally-conducted studies has permitted an estimate that 'one child in six or seven is being bullied in Australian schools with quite unacceptable frequency, that is, on a weekly basis or more often' (Rigby and Slee 1999).

However, it was in Scandinavia that the systematic investigation of and action against bullying behaviour was first extensively developed. Dan Olweus initiated his first large-scale survey of bullying behaviour in the greater Stockholm area in 1970 (Olweus 1973, in Olweus 1978) and, in a subsequent nationwide survey of bullying behaviour in Norway conducted in 1983, showed that 15% of 7- to 16-year-old students were involved in bullying behaviour: 9% as targets, 7% as perpetrators, and 1.6% as both perpetrators and targets (Olweus 1993). This survey was conducted as part of a nationwide anti-bullying programme (the world's first) in Norwegian primary and lower secondary schools, launched by the Ministry of Education in the autumn of 1983, in the wake of a newspaper report regarding three Norwegian teenagers who had committed bullying-induced suicide in late 1982 (Olweus 1999b).

It was also in Norway that the *European Seminar for Teachers on Bullying in Schools* was held, in Stavanger (O'Moore 1988). The seminar was 'instrumental... in awakening Europe to the need for research into school bullying' (O'Moore 1997, 136). Attendees at the seminar, after hearing about the recent progress made in Norway, attempted to facilitate research efforts into establishing the incidence and prevalence of bullying, and the development of anti-bullying intervention programmes, on their return to their home countries (O'Moore 1997). Twelve years later, although Vettenburg (1999) reported that it was almost impossible to say how common bullying behaviour was in European schools, a collection of 21 national reports on what was known about *bullying in schools* internationally was published (Smith et al. 1999). Four years later, a collection of 17 European national reports on what was known about *violence in schools* appeared (Smith 2003). However – and perhaps due to the specific focus adopted by many researchers following the 1987 Stavanger conference in the majority of these national reports on school violence it was possible to record far more information about school *bullying* than it was on school *violence*.

This was certainly true for the Irish national report (O'Moore and Minton 2003), as all previous medium- to large-scale empirical studies of aggressive behaviour in schools in Ireland (see Byrne 1999; O'Moore, Kirkham, and Smith 1997) had focussed solely on bullying. Most significantly of all, in the school year 1993–1994,

a nationwide survey of bullying behaviour in Irish schools had been undertaken. A representative sample of 20,422 students completed a modified version of the Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire (Olweus 1989; Whitney and Smith 1993). Of the 9599 primary school children involved in the survey, 31.2% reported having been bullied within the last school term (18.6% 'once or twice'; 8.4% 'sometimes'; 1.9% 'once a week'; and 2.4% 'several times a week'), and of the 10,843 post-primary children involved, 15.6% reported having been bullied (10.8% 'once or twice'; 2.9% 'sometimes'; 0.7% once a week; and 1.2% several times a week) (O'Moore, Kirkham, and Smith 1997).

Aggressive behaviour versus bullying behaviour: definitions

As Olweus notes, 'there is a good deal of bullying without violence... and, likewise, there is a good deal of violence that cannot be characterised as bullying' (Olweus 1999a, 12). *Bullying* is usually conceptualised as being a *sub-type* of the more general category of *aggressive behaviour* (Olweus 1999a; Roland and Idsøe 2001). Olweus (1999a) posits that within the general 'set' of aggressive behaviour, the sub-set of *bullying* intersects with *violence*, another sub-set, at the point where *physical bullying* is considered. Bullying behaviour may be differentiated from other types of aggressive behaviour on two counts – firstly, the idea of *repetition*: 'A person is being bullied when he or she is exposed, *repeatedly and over time*, to negative interactions on the part of one or more other persons' (Olweus 1991, 413; italics mine). And secondly, the idea of some form of *power imbalance*, in the perpetrator's favour, existing between the perpetrator and the target:[2] 'Aggressive behaviour may involve conflict between *equals*, whereas bullying always involves *hurting someone who is not quite able to defend himself/herself*' (Roland and Idsøe 2001, 446; italics mine). Hence, bullying behaviour is commonly defined as: 'long-standing violence, mental or physical, conducted by an individual or a group against an individual who is not able to defend himself or herself in that actual situation' (Roland 1989, in Mellor 1999, 94).

The psychological effects of school bullying and violence

O'Moore and Minton (2004) record that being made the target of bullying behaviour can, and often does, 'destroy a person's confidence and self-esteem [and] cause physical, emotional and psychological damage of the potentially most serious and long-lasting kind' (1). In a study of 423 parents and 420 children, Kumpulainen et al. (2001), using diagnostic measures based on those used in Rutter's (1976) afore-mentioned Isle of Wight study, found that children involved in bully/victim problems were more prone to have psychiatric disorders than non-involved children, with the most common diagnoses among children involved in bully/victim problems being attention deficit disorder, oppositional/conduct disorder, and depression.

Olweus' (1993) afore-mentioned studies have shown that those bullied at school had higher levels of depression and poorer self-esteem in adulthood. In a study of 209 12- to 15-year-old bullied and non-bullied students (97 male, 112 female) in eight urban post-primary schools in Ireland, Mills et al. (2004) found that having been bullied was significantly linked to depression, suicidal ideation, having made a suicide attempt, and referral to psychiatric services. Similarly, in Finland,

Kaltiala-Heino (1999) found that having been bullied was associated with depression and suicidal ideation; this finding was replicated by Roland (2000a) in a study of a representative sample of 2083 eighth graders (ca. 14-years-old) in Norwegian schools. O'Moore and Minton (2004) also ask their readers to 'consider the fact that in the year 2001, Neil Marr and Tim Field estimated that *sixteen children a year* in the United Kingdom take their own lives, as a result of literally having been "bullied to death"' (3), positing that 'our ultimate challenge, as members of school communities, must be to work together in constructive ways, in order that such heart-rending tragedies might be avoided' (3).

The present situation and study

Norway has retained its early 'lead' in both the investigation of and intervening against bullying behaviour in schools. Following the first (1983) and second (1997) nationwide anti-bullying programmes (see Olweus 1999b, and Roland and Munthe 1997, respectively), a research base that already comprised data from 130,000 school students by 1983 (Olweus 1999b), and the 2002 Government 'Manifesto against Bullying' (Manifesto Against Bullying 2004), enacted in 2003, required that school students have a bully-free work environment. Hence, schools are 'instructed to have anti-bullying work running' (Midthassel, Minton, and O'Moore 2009, 741), and will usually implement one of three government-approved programmes: the '*Olweus*', the '*Zero*' or the '*Respekt*' programmes (see Olweus 2004; Midthassel, Minton, and O'Moore 2009, 741; and SAF 2004, respectively).

Many other countries, in Europe, North America, Australasia, and beyond, have followed the Scandinavian lead in both investigating (for reviews see Berger 2007; Espelage and Swearer 2003; Farrington 1993; Minton and O'Moore 2004; Roland 2000b; Smith, Madsen, and Moody 1999; Smith and Brain 2000) and intervening against bullying behaviour (for reviews see Smith, Pepler, and Rigby 2004; Vreeman and Carroll 2007). This includes Ireland, where a successful regionally-based anti-bullying programme has been implemented in primary schools in Co. Donegal (O'Moore and Minton 2005). Nevertheless, in no country other than Norway have researchers and schools enjoyed the consistent and continuous backing of central government regarding their anti-bullying efforts.

It should also be noted that the phenomenon of *cyber-bullying* has become a matter of increasing concern for school communities and researchers alike. In Canada, Qing Li's 2006 study of 177 seventh graders recorded that 54% of the students reported having been bullied, and 25% reported having been cyber-bullied. Similarly, in a study of 92 11- to 16-year-old students undertaken for the UK's Anti-Bullying Alliance, Smith et al. (2006) found that 20 students (22% of the sample) had experienced cyber-bullying at least once, and that five students (6.6%) had experienced cyber-bullying frequently in the last two months. In Ireland, a study of 2794 12- to 16-year-old students, around one in seven (14.2%) reported having been cyber-bullied over the past couple of months, whereas around 1 in 11 (8.7%) reported having taken part in the cyber-bullying of others at school within the past couple of months (O'Moore and Minton 2009). The highest incidences of all have been recorded in Flanders (Vandebosch et al. 2006). In a study of cyber-bullying involving 636 primary school students, and 1416 secondary school students, when the 'number of youngsters who [had] come into contact with at least one form of

potentially offensive behaviour over the Internet or mobile phone that can be classified as related to cyber-bullying over the last three months' (5) was examined, 61.9% reported having been victims, 52.5% reported having been perpetrators, and 76.3% reported having been bystanders (Vandebosch et al. 2006).

However, the data presented here were collected in the autumn and winter terms of the academic year 2004–2005, which largely preceded this more recent research focus, although some information on the aggressive use of mobile telephones (e.g., nasty text messages) was sought and obtained therein. The research described here, then, marked an attempt to ascertain the prevalence of bullying behaviour and other forms of aggressive behaviour in Irish schools, by surveying students regarding the extent that they had been subjected to such acts.

Methodology

Modified versions of the Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire were completed by 2312 third to sixth class students (8- to 12-year-olds – 925 male, 1327 female) at 33 primary schools, and 3257 first to third year students (12- to 16-year-olds – 1568 male, 1689 female) at 12 post-primary schools, which were spread over the entire geographical area of the Republic of Ireland, in the autumn/winter terms of the academic year 2004–2005. These constituted all of the students in the specified year groups at the participating schools who were present when the survey was undertaken. The schools involved were those who at that time had taken up an invitation to participate in an attempted nationwide anti-bullying programme (Minton and O'Moore 2008).

The questionnaire used in the survey described here differed in a key way – essentially, the ordering of questionnaire items – from that used in previous studies of purely bullying behaviour. In the standard Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire (Olweus 1989; Whitney and Smith 1993), participants are provided with a definition of bullying, and then subsequently respond to items concerning whether they have been bullied or had bullied others, and if so, what form or forms the bullying took (in other words, items concerning specific aggressive behaviours). In the case of the current survey, there was a separation of the questionnaire items relating to bullying and aggressive specific behaviours – the participants first responded to items concerning specific aggressive behaviours, and then subsequently were provided with a definition of bullying, and only then responded to items concerning whether they had been bullied or had bullied others.

Questionnaires were sent out to 68 primary schools and 38 post-primary schools. The return rates were 48.5% and 31.6% for primary and post-primary schools respectively.

Results

Whilst not nationally representative, the survey of aggressive and bullying behaviour described here was by far the most extensive of its type undertaken in Ireland since O'Moore's nationwide representative survey of bullying behaviour (O'Moore, Kirkham, and Smith 1997).[3] The principal results are presented below.

Types of aggressive behaviour experienced by students

Physical aggression

The data from Table 1 showed that boys in this survey were more likely to report having been physically hurt (i.e., kicked or punched) than girls. At the primary level, 35.6% of boys, and 19.2% of girls, reported having been physically hurt ($\chi^2 = 72.02$ (1 df), $p < 0.01$); at the post-primary level, 34.8% of boys, and 14.2% of girls had been physically hurt ($\chi^2 = 183.47$ (1 df), $p < 0.01$). A comparison of the age cohort and response type categories showed that incidence rates of having been physically hurt were higher amongst boys than they were amongst girls, without a single exception. There was evidence of an age-related decline in having experienced such behaviour amongst primary school girls (from 24.2% in third class to 20.3% in sixth class); for boys, however, there were no clearly observable age-related trends. Hence, in determining whether a student responding to the current survey was likely to report having been physically hurt, male gender was more influential than was age, although amongst girls, older individuals were less at risk, for the most part, than were their younger counterparts.

Table 1. Percentages of students reporting that they had been physically hurt (e.g., kicked or punched) during the last three months.

School level	Gender	Class/year	Not at all	Now and again	About once a week	About once a day
Primary (n = 2296)	Boys (n = 1389)	3	64.5	25.4	5.8	4.3
		4	59.8	30.9	5.9	3.4
		5	63.3	30.9	3.7	2.1
		6	69.7	25.3	2.5	2.5
		Total	64.4	28.0	4.5	3.1
	Girls (n = 907)	3	75.8	20.3	1.9	1.9
		4	76.6	17.6	3.3	2.5
		5	84.2	14.1	0.5	0.9
		6	85.8	13.0	0.4	0.8
		Total	80.8	16.0	1.6	1.5
	PRIMARY TOTAL		70.9	23.3	3.3	2.5
Post-primary (n = 3155)	Boys (n = 1523)	1	68.4	26.1	3.0	2.6
		2	61.8	29.7	3.8	4.8
		3	65.2	27.5	3.8	3.6
		Total	65.2	27.7	3.5	3.6
	Girls (n = 1632)	1	85.6	12.6	0.7	1.2
		2	84.8	14.1	0.6	0.6
		3	87.3	10.9	0.8	1.0
		Total	85.8	12.6	0.7	0.9
	POST-PRIMARY TOTAL		75.9	19.9	2.0	2.2

Table 2. Percentages of students reporting that they had been called nasty names, made fun of or teased during the last three months.

School level	Gender	Class/year	Not at all	Now and again	About once a week	About once a day
Primary (n = 2306)	Boys (n = 1393)	3	57.6	29.7	8.1	4.7
		4	51.7	32.0	7.6	8.7
		5	52.7	34.6	5.7	6.9
		6	58.2	28.5	4.4	8.9
		Total	55.1	31.2	6.5	7.3
	Girls (n = 913)	3	68.1	26.7	1.9	3.3
		4	56.5	38.1	3.3	2.1
		5	66.1	28.4	2.3	3.2
		6	64.6	30.1	2.8	2.4
		Total	63.8	31.1	2.7	2.7
	PRIMARY TOTAL		58.5	31.1	5.0	5.5
Post-primary (n = 3163)	Boys (n = 1521)	1	59.8	31.3	3.5	5.4
		2	57.1	30.2	5.2	7.5
		3	56.2	30.0	5.7	8.2
		Total	57.8	30.5	4.7	7.0
	Girls (n = 1642)	1	64.6	28.3	3.1	4.0
		2	62.8	30.1	2.7	4.4
		3	62.6	28.6	4.3	4.5
		Total	63.4	29.0	3.3	4.3
	POST-PRIMARY TOTAL		60.7	29.7	4.0	5.6

Verbal aggression

Table 2 documents an increase with age in reports of having experienced verbal abuse on a daily basis amongst post-primary boys (from 40.2% in first year, to 43.8% in third year) and girls (from 35.4% in first year, to 37.4% in third year), and on a weekly basis amongst post-primary boys (from 3.5% in first year, to 5.7% in third year). Reports of having been so targeted were generally less frequent (although not statistically significantly so) amongst post-primary students overall (39.3%) than they were amongst primary students (41.5%). Furthermore, as was the case for reports of having been physically hurt (see Table 1), there were gender differences in terms of reports of having been verbally abused – at both the primary and post-primary levels, boys were more likely to have been targeted than were girls (44.9% versus 36.2% ($\chi^2 = 16.86$ (1 df), $p < 0.01$), and 42.2% versus 36.6% ($\chi^2 = 10.41$ (1 df), $p < 0.01$), respectively).

Table 3 (see p. 138) shows that 6.1% of girls and 13.0% of boys at the primary level, and 7.3% of girls and 10.7% of boys at the post-primary level, indicated that 'I was called nasty names about my colour or race'. Boys at both levels were statistically significantly more likely to have been targeted in this way than were girls ($\chi^2 = 28.42$ (1 df), $p < 0.01$, at the primary level, and $\chi^2 = 10.91$ (1 df), $p < 0.01$, at the post-primary level). The most notable findings in terms of seriousness seem to be the

Table 3. Percentages of students reporting that they had been called nasty names or teased about their colour or racial background during the last three months.

School level	Gender	Class/ year	Not at all	Now and again	About once a week	About once a day
Primary (n = 2258)	Boys (n = 1364)	3	85.1	11.1	1.7	2.0
		4	85.1	9.5	2.9	2.6
		5	86.9	11.2	1.2	0.6
		6	90.6	5.1	2.6	1.7
		Total	87.0	9.2	2.1	1.8
	Girls (n = 894)	3	93.3	6.3	0	0.5
		4	93.6	6.4	0	0
		5	93.9	5.2	0.9	0
		6	95.0	3.7	0.4	0.8
		Total	93.9	5.4	0.3	0.3
	PRIMARY TOTAL		89.7	7.7	1.4	1.2
Post-primary (n = 3116)	Boys (n = 1499)	1	93.8	5.1	0.4	0.8
		2	87.8	9.0	0.8	2.4
		3	85.9	7.7	1.9	4.5
		Total	89.3	7.2	1.0	2.5
	Girls (n = 1617)	1	93.3	5.0	0.8	0.8
		2	92.7	5.1	1.1	1.1
		3	91.9	6.2	0.4	1.4
		Total	92.7	5.4	0.8	1.1
	POST-PRIMARY TOTAL		91.1	6.3	0.9	1.8

incidence rates amongst the oldest boys in the sample – a total incidence of 12.2% and 14.1% amongst second and third year post-primary boys, with 2.4% and 4.5% respectively having reported experiencing this sort of abuse on a daily basis.

Reports of having experienced verbal abuse on the grounds of one's religion (Table 4, p. 139) were also tracked. Ireland is in fact very homogenous in terms of religion; the non-Christian population is very small indeed (somewhere around 5%). It should be noted that in Ireland it is as common to talk about *differences in Christian denomination* as *differences in religion*, and that the majority of Irish school children would invariably do so. In the current survey, in relation to primary school students, 6.7% (8.6% of boys, and 4.0% of girls) had been abused in this way; boys were statistically significantly more likely to have been so ($\chi^2 = 17.81$ (1 df), $p < 0.01$). In respect of post-primary students, 5.3% (6.6% of boys, and 4.2% of girls) reported having been verbally abused on the grounds of their religion; boys were statistically significantly more likely to do so ($\chi^2 = 8.47$ (1 df), $p < 0.01$).

Threatening behaviour

Table 5 (see p. 140) shows that primary students (21.1%) were more likely to report having been threatened than were post-primary students (17.9%); ($\chi^2 = 8.80$ (1 df), $p < 0.01$). Boys were more likely to report having been threatened than girls (24.9%

Table 4. Percentages of students reporting that they had been called nasty names or teased about their religion during the last three months.

School level	Gender	Class/year	Not at all	Now and again	About once a week	About once a day
Primary (n = 2260)	Boys (n = 1365)	3	88.7	8.1	1.7	1.4
		4	89.9	7.5	0.9	1.7
		5	92.6	5.9	0.6	0.9
		6	94.6	3.7	0.6	1.1
		Total	91.4	6.3	1.0	1.3
	Girls (n = 905)	3	95.2	3.8	0.5	0.5
		4	96.2	3.4	0.4	0
		5	96.3	3.3	0	0.5
		6	96.3	3.3	0	0.5
		Total	96.0	3.5	0.2	0.3
	PRIMARY TOTAL		93.3	5.2	0.7	0.9
Post-primary (n = 3107)	Boys (n = 1493)	1	96.0	3.2	0.4	0.4
		2	90.8	6.0	1.0	2.2
		3	93.3	4.1	1.5	1.1
		Total	93.4	4.4	0.9	1.2
	Girls (n = 1614)	1	95.3	3.7	0.3	0.7
		2	96.4	2.6	0.4	0.6
		3	95.7	3.3	0.2	0.8
		Total	95.8	3.2	0.3	0.7
	POST-PRIMARY TOTAL		94.7	3.8	0.6	0.9

versus 15.2% at the primary level ($\chi^2 = 31.41$ (1 df), $p < 0.01$), and 21.4% versus 14.6% at the post-primary level ($\chi^2 = 28.18$ (1 df), $p < 0.01$)).

'Indirect' aggression

Indirect aggression has been described as:

> ... more covert, usually involving the deliberate manipulation of social relationships in order to socially isolate someone, or to make others dislike someone. This may include ignoring someone, and/or inducing others to do so; the spreading of malicious rumours, falsehoods or gossip; and the circulation of nasty notes, or the writing of insulting graffiti. (O'Moore and Minton 2004, 12)

From Table 6 (see p. 141) it can be seen that primary students were more likely to report having been left out, excluded or ignored, than were post-primary students (26.4% at the primary level, versus 18.2% at the post-primary level ($\chi^2 = 28.06$ (1 df), $p < 0.01$) for boys, and 34.1% at the primary level versus 28.8% at the post-primary level ($\chi^2 = 7.72$ (1 df), $p < 0.01$) for girls). Girls were more likely to report having been 'left out, excluded or ignored' than were boys (34.1% versus 26.4% at the primary level ($\chi^2 = 15.43$ (1 df), $p < 0.01$), and 28.8% versus 18.2% at the post-primary level ($\chi^2 = 48.01$ (1 df), $p < 0.01$)).

Table 5. Percentages of students reporting that they had been threatened during the last three months.

School level	Gender	Class/year	Not at all	Now and again	About once a week	About once a day
Primary (n = 2301)	Boys (n = 1390)	3	71.8	21.6	4.3	2.3
		4	71.5	21.1	4.2	3.1
		5	76.6	19.4	2.5	1.5
		6	80.4	15.5	3.3	0.8
		Total	75.1	19.4	3.6	1.9
	Girls (n = 911)	3	81.8	14.8	2.4	1.0
		4	84.5	13.4	1.3	0.8
		5	89.4	8.3	0.9	1.4
		6	84.2	14.2	1.2	0.4
		Total	84.8	12.7	1.5	1.0
	PRIMARY TOTAL		78.9	16.7	2.8	1.6
Post-primary (n = 3138)	Boys (n = 1511)	1	82.0	15.4	1.9	0.8
		2	76.2	18.8	1.8	3.2
		3	77.1	16.8	3.8	2.3
		Total	78.6	16.9	2.4	2.1
	Girls (n = 1627)	1	88.0	11.0	0.3	0.7
		2	84.0	14.2	0.9	0.9
		3	83.9	14.7	0.6	0.8
		Total	85.4	13.2	0.6	0.8
	POST-PRIMARY TOTAL		82.1	15.0	1.5	1.4

It has traditionally been recorded (O'Moore, Kirkham, and Smith 1997; O'Moore and Minton 2004; Smith et al. 1999) that male students are more likely than are female students to suffer direct aggression from their same-sex peers (e.g., physical attacks, threatening behaviour), and female students are more likely than are male students to suffer indirect aggression from their same-sex peers (e.g., exclusion, lies, rumour spreading). Whilst the data recorded in Tables 1 (physical hurt), 5 (threatening behaviour) and 6 (being left out, excluded or ignored) are in accordance with these generally observed gender differences, the case is less clear cut regarding the data in Table 7 (see p. 142). No statistically significant gender differences existed at the primary level (28.5% of boys had been so targeted, compared with 29.5% of girls); however, at the post-primary level, girls were significantly more likely than boys to have had lies told or rumours spread about them (27.5% of boys were so targeted, compared with 35.0% of girls ($\chi^2 = 20.35$ (1 df), $p < 0.01$)). Hence, post-primary girls were the most frequently subjected to this type of behaviour – significantly more so than their primary counterparts ($\chi^2 = 8.10$ (1 df), $p < 0.01$). In other words, the data only partially support the general gender difference assertion made by previous researchers; or possibly, this type of behaviour may be particularly acute amongst post-primary girls.

Theft of and damage to personal property

Table 8 (see p. 143) shows that boys rather than girls (12.6% versus 9.2% at the primary level ($\chi^2 = 6.74$ (1 df), $p < 0.01$), and 15.6% versus 11.1% at the post-primary level ($\chi^2 = 13.79$ (1 df), $p < 0.01$)) were significantly more likely to report that that they had had money or belongings taken away from them, or had had their clothing or property deliberately damaged. Post-primary boys rather than primary boys ($\chi^2 = 5.07$ (1 df), $p < 0.05$) were significantly more likely to report having been targeted in this way. There were no statistically significant differences between primary and post-primary girls' reports in this respect. The net result of all of this was, of course, that reports were most frequent amongst post-primary boys (15.6%), and least frequent amongst primary girls (9.2%).

Aggressive use of mobile telephones

As can be seen from Table 9 (see p. 144), 9.9% of primary students and 11.5% of post-primary students reported that they had been sent nasty text messages, or otherwise got at via the use of mobile telephones. Amongst boys, primary students were more likely (although not statistically significantly so) to report having experienced this than were post-primary students (10.8% versus 9.6% respectively).

Table 6. Percentages of students reporting that they had been left out, excluded or ignored during the last three months.

School level	Gender	Class/year	Not at all	Now and again	About once a week	About once a day
Primary (n = 2271)	Boys (n = 1363)	3	66.0	25.5	5.0	3.5
		4	69.5	22.1	5.2	3.2
		5	81.3	14.0	2.8	1.9
		6	77.9	15.6	4.2	2.3
		Total	73.6	19.4	4.3	2.7
	Girls (n = 908)	3	59.1	33.7	5.3	1.9
		4	61.3	34.9	2.6	1.3
		5	68.8	28.9	0.9	1.4
		6	73.7	22.7	2.8	0.8
		Total	65.9	30.0	2.8	1.3
	PRIMARY TOTAL		70.5	23.7	3.7	2.1
Post-primary (n = 3106)	Boys (n = 1496)	1	84.5	13.0	1.7	0.8
		2	81.9	13.9	2.2	2.0
		3	78.8	16.6	3.0	1.7
		Total	81.8	14.4	2.3	1.5
	Girls (n = 1610)	1	70.9	25.0	2.7	1.3
		2	71.5	23.0	2.4	3.0
		3	71.3	22.0	3.7	2.9
		Total	71.2	23.5	2.9	2.4
	POST-PRIMARY TOTAL		76.3	19.1	2.6	1.9

Table 7. Percentages of students reporting that they had lies told or rumours spread about them during the last three months.

School level	Gender	Class/year	Not at all	Now and again	About once a week	About once a day
Primary (n = 2272)	Boys (n = 1372)	3	73.1	20.5	3.5	2.9
		4	67.9	25.1	4.6	2.3
		5	73.4	23.5	1.5	1.5
		6	71.7	22.4	4.2	1.7
		Total	71.5	22.9	3.5	2.1
	Girls (n = 900)	3	68.9	25.2	5.3	0.5
		4	67.8	31.4	0.4	0.4
		5	72.3	24.2	2.3	0.9
		6	73.1	23.7	1.6	1.6
		Total	70.5	26.0	2.5	0.9
	PRIMARY TOTAL		71.1	24.2	3.1	1.6
Post-primary (n = 3124)	Boys (n = 1495)	1	77.1	18.4	3.2	1.3
		2	72.0	21.7	3.0	3.2
		3	67.9	27.0	3.2	1.9
		Total	72.5	22.2	3.1	2.1
	Girls (n = 1629)	1	66.3	28.5	3.5	1.7
		2	64.9	29.8	2.2	3.1
		3	63.6	30.0	4.9	1.4
		Total	65.0	29.4	3.5	2.1
	POST-PRIMARY TOTAL		68.6	26.0	3.3	2.1

The reverse was true amongst girls (8.7% and 13.3% respectively), a finding which reached statistical significance ($\chi^2 = 12.04$ (1 df), $p < 0.01$); it was amongst post-primary girls (13.3%) that the highest incidence rate was found. Within the school levels, there was no statistically significant gender difference at the primary level, but at the post-primary level, girls were significantly more likely to have been targeted in this way than were boys ($\chi^2 = 10.09$ (1 df), $p < 0.01$).

Student involvement in bullying behaviour

In recording the overall incidence rates of involvement in bully/victim problems, all categories of frequency of involvement – 'it has happened now and again', 'about once a week', and 'about once a day' – were summed and included (see Table 10 on page 145).

It can be seen from Table 10 that 35.3% of primary school students (39.8% of boys, and 30.4% of girls) reported having been involved in bully/victim problems – that is to say, reported that they had either been bullied or had bullied someone else, or both – within the last three months preceding the survey. Boys were statistically more likely than girls to have been so involved ($\chi^2 = 21.61$ (1 df), $p < 0.01$). At the post-primary school level, 36.4% of students – 41.1% of boys and 32.0% of

Table 8. Percentages of students reporting that they had had money or belongings taken away from them, or had had their clothing or property deliberately damaged during the last three months.

School level	Gender	Class/year	Not at all	Now and again	About once a week	About once a day
Primary (n = 2281)	Boys (n = 1374)	3	83.2	12.8	2.3	1.7
		4	84.4	11.9	1.7	2.0
		5	90.4	8.0	0.9	0.6
		6	91.5	7.3	0.8	0.3
		Total	87.4	10.0	1.5	1.2
	Girls (n = 907)	3	86.1	10.0	1.9	1.9
		4	93.3	5.0	0.8	0.8
		5	91.5	6.6	0.9	0.9
		6	93.1	6.1	0.4	0.4
		Total	90.8	7.2	1.0	1.0
	PRIMARY TOTAL		88.8	8.9	1.3	1.1
Post-primary (n = 3099)	Boys (n = 1489)	1	86.8	11.3	1.3	0.6
		2	83.7	13.1	1.6	1.6
		3	82.5	13.9	1.9	1.7
		Total	84.4	12.7	1.6	1.3
	Girls (n = 1610)	1	88.5	10.6	0.2	0.7
		2	89.4	9.5	0.4	0.7
		3	89.0	10.2	0.2	0.6
		Total	88.9	10.1	0.2	0.7
	POST-PRIMARY TOTAL		86.8	11.4	0.9	1.0

girls – reported having been involved in bully/victim problems within the last three months; again, boys were statistically more likely to have been involved ($\chi^2 = 28.78$ (1 df), $p < 0.01$).

In terms of comparisons with O'Moore's nationwide survey, Table 11 (see p. 145) shows that there was a lower incidence of primary students' general involvement in bullying behaviour (35.3% versus 43.5% respectively; $\chi^2 = 51.59$ (1 df), $p < 0.01$). There were particular lowered instances in the 'involvement as a bully only' (6.8% in the survey described here, versus 12.3% in O'Moore's survey; $\chi^2 = 56.79$ (1 df), $p < 0.01$) and 'involvement as both a bully and a victim' category (7.3% in the survey described here, versus 14.1% in O'Moore's survey; $\chi^2 = 77.0$ (1 df), $p < 0.01$). Conversely, there was a higher incidence of involvement as a 'victim only' (21.2% in the survey described here, versus 17.1% in O'Moore's survey; $\chi^2 = 21.30$ (1 df), $p < 0.01$). In short, compared with data accrued from O'Moore's survey, the primary school students in the present survey were significantly less likely to report having been involved in bully/victim problems overall, less likely to report having bullied others, but significantly more likely to report having been involved as a 'pure' victim.

Table 11 also shows that in terms of comparisons with O'Moore's nationwide survey, there was a higher incidence of post-primary students' general involvement in bullying behaviour (36.4% versus 26.4% respectively; $\chi^2 = 118.71$ (1 df), $p < 0.01$).

Table 9. Percentages of students reporting that they had been sent nasty text messages, or otherwise got at via the use of mobile telephones during the last three months.

School level	Gender	Class/year	Not at all	Now and again	About once a week	About once a day
Primary (n = 2263)	Boys (n = 1362)	3	90.2	6.8	2.4	0.6
		4	86.8	9.5	2.9	0.9
		5	90.1	8.7	1.2	0
		6	89.9	7.9	1.1	1.1
		Total	89.2	8.2	1.9	0.7
	Girls (n = 901)	3	92.2	6.8	0.5	0.5
		4	92.0	6.3	1.7	0
		5	92.6	7.0	0.5	0
		6	88.5	10.7	0.4	0.4
		Total	91.3	7.7	0.8	0.2
	PRIMARY TOTAL		90.1	8.0	1.5	0.5
Post-primary (n = 3078)	Boys (n = 1479)	1	93.1	6.0	0.4	0.6
		2	89.5	7.9	1.0	1.6
		3	88.4	8.6	1.3	1.7
		Total	90.4	7.4	0.9	1.3
	Girls (n = 1599)	1	87.8	10.2	1.4	0.7
		2	87.5	10.8	0.8	0.9
		3	84.6	13.7	1.0	0.6
		Total	86.7	11.4	1.1	0.8
	POST-PRIMARY TOTAL		88.5	9.5	1.0	1.0

In the 'involvement as a bully only' category, 13.5% reported having bullied others, but not having been bullied in the survey described here, compared with 10.8% in O'Moore's survey ($\chi^2 = 17.97$ (1 df), $p < 0.01$). In the 'involvement as both a bully and a victim' category, the incidence rates were 7.7% in the survey described here, versus 4.1% in O'Moore's survey ($\chi^2 = 68.56$ (1 df), $p < 0.01$). Finally, 'involvement as a victim only' category, the incidence rates were 15.2% in the survey described here, compared with 11.5% in O'Moore's survey ($\chi^2 = 31.21$ (1 df), $p < 0.01$). To sum up, compared with data accrued from O'Moore's survey, the post-primary school students in the survey described here were significantly more likely to report having been involved in bully/victim problems overall, and in the 'pure bully', 'pure victim' and the 'bully-victim' categories.

A further point of comparison between the survey described here and that of O'Moore is of interest. In O'Moore's nationwide survey, the post-primary students had a lower overall rate of involvement in bully/victim problems than did the primary students (26.4% versus 43.5% respectively); this was strongly statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 659.47$ (1 df), $p < 0.01$). However, in the survey described here, the post-primary students had a very similar overall rate of involvement in bully/victim problems to the primary students (36.4% versus 35.3% respectively; this was not a statistically significant difference). Hence, the general finding of an age-related decline in

Table 10. Percentages of students reporting involvement in bully-victim problems during the last three months.

School level	Gender	Class/ year	Involved as a victim only	Involved as a bully only	Involved as both a bully and a victim	Total involved	Not involved
Primary (n = 2312)	Boys (n = 925)	3	25.7	4.0	8.1	37.9	*62.1*
		4	28.3	6.8	10.5	45.6	*54.4*
		5	20.2	6.7	7.0	33.9	*66.1*
		6	15.0	16.2	10.0	41.2	*58.8*
		Total	22.3	8.5	9.0	39.8	*60.2*
	Girls (n = 1387)	3	22.0	3.3	5.7	31.1	*68.9*
		4	23.2	3.4	6.3	32.9	*67.1*
		5	22.2	3.6	6.3	32.1	*67.9*
		6	15.8	7.3	2.8	25.9	*74.1*
		Total	20.7	4.5	5.3	30.4	*69.6*
	PRIMARY TOTAL		21.2	6.8	7.3	35.3	*64.7*
Post-primary (n = 3205)	Boys (n = 1542)	1	16.1	14.2	8.6	39.0	*61.0*
		2	14.1	17.1	11.7	42.9	*57.1*
		3	13.4	18.1	10.2	41.7	*58.3*
		Total	14.6	16.4	10.1	41.1	*58.9*
	Girls (n = 1663)	1	16.8	10.6	6.4	33.7	*66.3*
		2	15.3	12.5	4.3	32.1	*67.9*
		3	14.6	9.5	5.6	29.7	*70.3*
		Total	15.6	10.9	5.4	32.0	*68.0*
	POST-PRIMARY TOTAL		15.2	13.5	7.7	36.4	*63.6*

involvement in bully/victim problems (O'Moore, Kirkham, and Smith 1997; Smith, Madsen, and Moody 1999) was not borne out by the findings of the survey described here.

Table 11. Comparison of percentages of students reporting involvement in bully-victim problems during the last three months in the 2004–2005 survey and in O'Moore's 1993–1994 nationwide survey.

	Primary students		Post-primary students	
Involvement	Nationwide study (O'Moore 1993–1994)	Current study (2004–2005)	Nationwide study (O'Moore 1993–1994)	Current study (2004–2005)
As a victim only	17.1	21.2	11.5	15.2
As a bully only	12.3	6.8	10.8	13.5
As both a bully and a victim	14.1	7.3	4.1	7.7
TOTAL INVOLVEMENT	43.5	35.3	26.5	36.4

Discussion

Types of aggressive behaviour experienced by students

Some discernible effects of both age and gender regarding students' experiences of aggressive behaviour were observed (see 'Results' section). Broadly speaking, boys were more likely to report having been physically hurt (see Table 1) than were girls, who also evidenced an age-related decline in having experienced such behaviours. So too were boys more likely than girls to report being subject to verbal aggression (see Table 2), although age also played a role in this case – reports were generally less frequent (although not statistically significantly so) amongst post-primary students than they were amongst primary students. When verbal aggression related to either race/ethnicity (see Table 3) or religion (see Table 4), boys at both the primary and post-primary levels were statistically significantly more likely to have been targeted in this way than were girls, and such reports grew more frequent amongst boys with increasing age.

Once again, boys were more likely to report having been threatened (see Table 5) than were girls, although in this case, reports of having been threatened were more common at the primary than at the post-primary level. Primary students were more likely to report having been left out, excluded or ignored (see Table 6) than were post-primary students; however, here, girls were more likely to report having experienced such abuse than were boys. At the post-primary level, girls were significantly more likely than boys to have had lies told or rumours spread about them (see Table 7), and post-primary girls were more frequently subjected to this type of behaviour than were their primary counterparts. Boys, rather than girls, were significantly more likely to report that that they had had money or belongings taken away from them, or had had their clothing or property deliberately damaged (see Table 8), and post-primary boys rather than primary boys were significantly more likely to report having been targeted in this way.

Hence, we have seen that in the survey described here, that whilst *age* seems to exert an influence that varies according to the specific category of aggressive behaviour under consideration (rather than the 'general decline' that may have been predicted by studies such as those by O'Moore, Kirkham, and Smith 1997; Smith, Madsen, and Moody 1999), *gender*, to an extent, exerts a clearer effect. Boys were more likely than girls to have been subjected to *direct* forms of aggressive behaviour – physical, verbal (general, race-related and religion-related), threats and reports of having had possessions and money taken away, or one's possessions deliberately damaged. Girls were more likely to report having been subjected to *indirect* forms of aggressive behaviour (being left out, excluded or ignored, and having lies told or rumours spread about one), although this was true at the post-primary level only for the latter category. This general distinction between the genders and direct/indirect types of aggressive behaviour essentially supports similar findings nationally (O'Moore, Kirkham, and Smith, 1997) and internationally (for reviews see Smith 2003; Smith et al. 1999; Smith, Pepler, and Rigby 2004; also, in terms of afore-mentioned studies in this paper, Olweus 1993, 1999a, b; Smith and Brain 2000).

The aggressive use of mobile telephones did not feature in past surveys of bullying in Ireland; whilst mobile telephone ownership or usage amongst 8- to 16-year-olds in Ireland is almost universal nowadays, this was clearly not the case in 1993–1994, when O'Moore conducted her nationwide survey. In the present survey, the likelihood

of reporting being victimised via text messages or otherwise via mobile telephones (Table 9) increased with age, and gender divisions varied with age – at the primary level, boys were more likely to report having been targeted in this way than were girls; the reverse was true at the post-primary level. In itself, this finding marks a minor contribution to a rapidly expanding literature concerning cyber-bullying (e.g., Li 2006; O'Moore and Minton 2009; Smith et al. 2006; Vandebosch et al. 2006).

Student involvement in bullying behaviour

In the survey described here, it was found (see Table 10) that 35.3% of primary students and 36.4% of post-primary students had been involved in bully/victim problems over the last three months; in O'Moore's nationwide study, these figures were 43.5% and 26.4% respectively (see Table 11). In the intervening years between the two studies, a significant primary school programme, '*Stay Safe*' (which has, amongst its aims, the prevention and countering of school bullying) has come to be implemented by the majority of primary schools in Ireland. Apart from two curricular initiatives (*Social Personal and Health Education* (SPHE) and *Civil, Social and Political Education* (CSPE)) – both of which had as their scope primary *and* post-primary schools – *no* nationwide initiative in Ireland has focussed on post-primary bullying directly. The results alone from the current survey would indicate that anti-bullying intervention efforts targeted particularly at post-primary students should be actively supported.

In terms of international comparisons, Tikkanen and Junge (2004) concluded, on the basis of between 6.6% and 9.1% of primary school (Grade 6) students, and 4.0% and 4.9% of secondary school (Grade 9) students reporting having been bullied, that 'bullying is a significant problem throughout the Norwegian school system'. Using the Norwegian figures alone as a point of comparison, one would have to conclude that bullying is a *very* significant problem throughout the Irish school system. Given what is known about the effects of school bullying through national (Mills et al. 2004) and international (Kaltiala-Heino 1999; Kumpulainen et al. 2001; Marr and Field 2001; Olweus 1993; Roland 2000a) research, this is a matter of considerable concern.

However, it should perhaps be recalled that bullying has been 'a topic of great concern in the Scandinavian countries for nearly thirty years' (Roland and Munthe 1997, 233), and research and interventions within this field in Norway have been strongly supported during this period by successive Norwegian governments. Clearly, considerable expertise has been built up during that time period, and it seems possible that this has had a positive effect on the levels of bullying behaviour recorded in Norway, as the figures cited above from the studies of Tikkanen and Junge (2004) would appear rather low in comparison with those observed elsewhere. Indeed, very generally speaking, international comparisons reveal that the situation regarding bullying behaviour in Norwegian schools seems unusually 'good', and that the situation in Ireland seems to be more in line with countries outside of Norway. It could, therefore, be argued that as Norway seems to excel in effective action undertaken against bullying behaviour in schools, that future anti-bullying actions in Ireland could be usefully informed by those of our Norwegian counterparts.

Conclusions

Firstly, it has been shown that aggressive behaviour appeared to be widespread in Irish schools; whilst age trends varied across individual categories of aggressive behaviour, gender differences were more clear, with the traditional and cross-national distinction between 'direct' and 'indirect' forms of aggressive behaviour being more commonly inflicted upon and by boys and girls respectively (Olweus 1993, 1999a, b; O'Moore, Kirkham, and Smith 1997; Smith and Brain 2000) being, for the most part, supported. Whilst reports of having been teased or called nasty names on the basis of colour/racial background, or religion, were comparatively infrequent, such reports *did* exist. These findings exemplify the importance of far greater societal issues around diversity, tolerance and integration – factors that are set to become increasingly important in a country in which multiculturalism is a reality for the first time. Some information regarding the prevalence of aggressive behaviour via mobile telephones was accrued – that is to say, around 1 in 10 students had been abused in this way. It is suggested that these trends should be borne in mind in the design of subsequent school-based intervention programmes and strategies against aggressive behaviour, and given the current body of research that is being accrued on cyber-bullying in a number of countries worldwide (see Li 2006; O'Moore and Minton 2009; Smith et al. 2006; Vandebosch et al. 2006).

Secondly, it appears that bully/victim problems are persistent in Irish schools. In the present survey, it was found that 35.3% of primary students and 36.4% of post-primary students had been involved in bully/victim problems over the last three months. Given what is known about the serious nature of the effects of bullying (Kaltiala-Heino 1999; Kumpulainen et al. 2001; Marr and Field 2001; Mills et al. 2004; Olweus 1993; O'Moore and Minton 2004; Roland 2000a) this is a matter of considerable concern. Bully/victim problems were particularly acute at the post-primary level, and were more common amongst boys than they were amongst girls. Again, this finding was consistent with other large-scale surveys undertaken nationally and internationally (Mellor 1990; Olweus 1978, 1991, 1993, 1999a, b; O'Moore, Kirkham, and Smith 1997; Rigby and Slee 1999; Smith 1997; Smith and Brain 2000).

Finally, it may be noted that in Norway, where similar expertise has been nurtured by successive national governments, substantial inroads into preventing and dealing with bullying behaviour in schools would appear to have been made (Olweus 2004; Roland and Munthe 1997; Tikkanen and Junge 2004, 2005). If the lessons learnt from 20 years of anti-bullying research and practise in Ireland can similarly be translated into centrally-supported attempts to intervene nationally, then there should be grounds for great optimism in preventing and countering school bullying behaviour.

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Notes

1. It should be explained that the term 'bully/victim problems' (note the *forward slash* punctuation mark) refers to any sort of involvement in instances of bullying behaviour. It therefore includes involvement solely as a perpetrator (so-called 'pure bullies'), solely as a target (so-called 'pure victims'), and involvement as both a perpetrator and a target (so-called 'bully-victims' – note the *hyphen* punctuation mark). The terms 'bully/victim problems' and 'bully-victims' both have long-standing usage in the research literature; I have been careful to retain the punctuation conventions referred to immediately above in order to limit any possible confusion.
2. However, this is not the case in the most commonly-used definition of bullying behaviour in Ireland (found in the Department of Education and Science's 1993 Guidelines on Countering Bullying in Primary and Post-Primary Schools), which states that bullying is 'repeated aggression, verbal, psychological or physical, conducted by an individual or group against others' (Department of Education and Science 1993, 6). This definition, by the omission of the notion of a power-imbalance, does not permit the differentiation of bullying behaviour from so-called 'fair-fights', which would seem to be problematic, when considering working at the practical level in schools.
3. It should be noted that O'Moore's nationwide survey (O'Moore, Kirkham, and Smith 1997) was almost four times as large, and utilised a sampling frame that ensured the data were nationally representative; hence, although not strictly comparable, reference will be made to O'Moore's study when considering the implications of the findings of the survey described here.

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